

'Making the Darkness Conscious'

Elegiac Temporality in Seamus Heaney's *North* (1975)

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*One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light,
but by making the darkness conscious.*
Carl Jung

The intention of this article is to introduce the *PAN* reader to a new conversation on elegy, inspired by the particular fusion of philosophy and environmentalism found in this journal that can travel more frequently to literary criticism.

Ordinarily obscured by twentieth-century humanities frameworks insisting on a history of textualized remembrance (inflected by grieving and consolation), elegy, the term for a specific poetic practice, is used less to refer to the gravitas of shouldering the responsibility for carrying loss into our future than it is for turning private grief (for the termination of the past) into public display in the present. Either of these two modes would translate well to the plight of the Sixth Great Extinction, but I prefer to look at the former as it speaks more profoundly to our plight. That said, I turn to a text that is not directly concerned with species extinction; it is a text deeply sensitive to the need for intergenerational healing from violence, and a text respectful of the cultural practices and processes of healing that take precedence over the content. This focus is not a metaphorical vehicle for other locally specific feelings, nor is the intention to offer a transcendental or archetypal model of Anthropocene affect; the literary analysis speaks implicitly to today's decolonised pathways for collective relationships. Examples of this kind can be found in contemporary reconnections to ancestry and the repositioning of trauma in Australasia and North America, which focus spirituality and voice back into lives to heal and address loss across generations that has come from invasion, land appropriation and foreign language imposition.²

With this context for addressing the disruption to community relationships and practices put to one side, we have loss in mind. What is missing in traditional literary study, I contend, is a poetics of loss, especially loss apposite for our era: the Anthropocene. If our philosophy and cultural communication were allowed to draw more fully from the elegiac mode—or to the sensitivity elegy brings to the diminishing light of last things—would our environmental reckoning bring us closer to slow violence or turn us away from it? What would a definition of Anthropocene poetics be without a significant outline of loss in our age, and how might this historical framework diminish or enlighten the temporality of our grieving?

One step away from the environmental chaos that the Great Acceleration bequeathed to the twenty-first century, is the destruction of sectarian killings of the twentieth century, which meet with an all-encompassing notion of death in Seamus

Heaney's collection of poetry, *North* (1975). European myths from across the centuries alluding to cultural renewal and regeneration inhabit the textual space while enfolded contemporary loss into griefwork for direct and indirect violence to our earth others. Such a process of absorption and containment can be open; it does not necessarily ultimately relativize mourning: it can expand the sense of persistent fluidity and mutation that is witnessed and memorialized in culture. *North* casts a shadow on demythologized violence and injects melancholic purpose in its transmission of story. This achievement, I contend, is of literary distinction charged with an understanding of what we do and what we have done in God's name, and of what we can do under the signs of the gods.

Poetry is a model of listening and speaking that is capable not only of reconciling contrary perspectives on violence and loss; when it attunes to the representational politics of elegy, poetry discloses a space of conciliation in which we can consider our relationship to others —those that are already lost and those that will become lost. I seek to find a voice that is not consumed by affect, as relevant and apposite as that might be for loss in the Anthropocene; and I selectively tackle an underlying ethics that derives not from a concern for the environment, but for bringing consciousness to darkness.³

Ideas of North

North was published by Faber and Faber in London in 1975 during a period of historical grievance between two cultures largely discriminated by their loyalty to Protestant and Catholic traditions, as brought into relief by the consequences of British occupation. In this corner of Europe, ensuing sectarian partisanship converted narrative (mythos) into idea (logos), most specifically the emergence and defence of definitions and pre-histories of the Irish Republic. Seamus Heaney brings a mythological perspective, underpinned by the geography of his personal experience to the literature of the islands of Ireland. *North* is no exception here, but it is exceptional in that it is anchored in grief that runs through the violence of historical conquests to the contemporaneous political violence in Northern Ireland. One cannot help feeling that there is both something unique and disturbing in the contemporary scene of 'the troubles', while also feeling that something dark persists in culture; *North* encourages us to intuit that myth provides access to it.

The title poem, 'North', follows three series of eight, seven and five quatrains that respectively constitute the poem 'Funeral Rites'. The final series is all the more powerful for its brevity, especially as it is freighted by the preceding poetry. It begins by declaring 'When' a collective 'we' will 'drive north again' (3: 1, 3, my emphasis). The occasion that will bridge the 'south' and 'north', it is imagined, will coincide with men walking slowly as one procession towards the sacred burial grounds ('the mounds') of ancestors. If not conflating two historically distinct burial practices, the serpent-like procession conjoins the 'megalithic doorway' of 'the great chambers of Boyne' to the speaker's desire to 'restore' his culture in the present (2: 22, 28, 9, 8). The small area of the valley of the River Boyne in County Meath has witnessed human burial practices since 4000BC. Heaney's poem recalls the historical rite, whereby a circular cairn of smaller stones or earthen mound closes off the passage to the bodies held in stone chambers; in-so-doing, it suggests an end to conflict by respectfully marking a space for the dead but symbolically closing the conversation on the ground for any further dispute: 'hill' and 'mouth' are present and silent, bodies and conflict are laid to rest, unresolved.

Laurence Coupe's reading of Genesis spies the celebration of female fertility as the source of all life, which —drawing from the feminist, Anne Primavesi— leads us to 'the need for an "uncommon" perception of the serpent':

This representative of the animal world is a symbol of the wisdom offered to humankind in interaction with that world. ... The serpent exposes the complex problems involved in following fixed rules of conduct or imposed norms of behaviour. (Primavesi 2004: 110 [cited Coupe 2009: 16])

Such uncommon imagining does not come to us in the future in *North*; it comes 'Now', as the community hears of murdered neighbours while they 'pine for ceremony, / customary rhythms' (2: 1, 3-4, my emphasis); these are rules of conduct that offer up security and identity while the barricades divide the country. Heaney's version of restoration comes 'when they have put the stone / back in its mouth' (3:1-2). It is a vision of physical closure and an echo of a ritual sustained through deep human time. This literal and symbolic death ends the modern structural sin of separating birth and death; connection to *this* ancestry affords a perspective on where one form of storytelling will end and where something new must come: these two things are united in a specific geography and by poetic imagery in this collection of lyrical poetry. If readers new to *North* bear with me as I gesture towards the way the collection embodies an imaginative integrated diplomacy, we will share in a story of what recovery (not consolation) involves.

During this uncommon perception of death (above), we understand 'the cud of memory / allayed for once' and the 'arbitration / of the feud placated' (3: 5-6, 6-7); such peace comes as the dead are laid to rest under the village's mound (the ancient burial site). How they rest, however, is confirmed by the most striking simile of the collection, inviting us to consider how we listen to, respect and speak what is named 'the word-hoard' in this collection, and it is a cousin to elegy. The murdered will be:

disposed like Gunnar
who lay beautiful
inside his burial mound,
though dead by violence

and unavenged.
Men said that he was chanting
verses about honour
and that four lights burned

in corners of the chamber:
which opened then, as he turned
with a joyful face
to look at the moon. (3: 9-16)

To invoke the historical king of the early fifth century, 'Gunnar', is to draw from Nordic myth and German oral history, which lead towards a wide-range of conflicting and contested stories in which the leader of his people dies in a snake pit. Deftly gauging how to invoke a character located in many cultures and inherited traditions that are transported through violence and trade, Heaney seems to critique the mobilisation of myth in his own culture. The poet keeps with his idiosyncratic reading of the mythological character to transgress established ceremony and ritual. He does this for its own sake, I feel, but also more sagely in allusion to the energy associated with the serpent (above). To be 'disposed' (3: 9) is not to be despatched; it is to be willing, to be of a mind. Such inclination, according to the mythological figure inflected by Heaney's complex pre-modern non-dualist attraction to cosmological light, is undoubtedly in harmony with the domestic through 'chanting'. What, therefore, is this song? Moreover, how does this song come from the voice that has not sought, or is unable to seek, retaliation; is this the space elegy inhabits in its peaceful repose that contrasts to clearly with revenge and bitterness?

There is an absorbing atmospheric presence in this song; it animates the telling into the present tense, which we sense as a movement within stillness registered in the bodies laid out with 'their eyelids glistening' and in the physical agency of the material components of the ritual: 'wax melted down / and veined the candles', the coffin lid nail-heads 'dressed / with little gleaming crosses' (1: 6, 17-18, 24-25). Poetry can easily accentuate such energy, with changes in tense, with lines running over stanzaic division, with telescopic metaphor. It can imitate what has been discovered by new materialism by allowing these energies to bleed through its lines; it can be confused with pantheism, or an onto-poetics that is alert to energetic processes and affective circuits. In this poem, there is also a non-violent chanting echoed, or repeated, by ten thousand engines of 'purring family cars' at the funeral procession. It is for the reader to elect whether the isolated chambers of petrochemical vehicles brought into a temporary mass of 'muffled drumming' connect to their own sense of irony, and to decide whether this sound — to which the 'whole country' is attuned (2: 13, 14) — is pathetic. In *North*, the wretchedness of things is repeatedly left for the reader to observe a magnetic fear cast in its shadow that destabilises culture, or to infer that deeper religious transcendence than that provided by modern Christianity is one means to escape the politicised misery.

Furthermore, in 'North', in the absence of anything magical and inspiring in 'the secular / powers of the Atlantic', the 'invitations of Iceland, / and the pathetic colonies of Greenland' (3-4, 7-8), our speaker is taken by an idiom 'remote from the agnostic world of economic interest' (Heaney 1980: 57). Once involved in this idiom the speaker is suddenly enraptured by the dead and by those wielding death. The 'fabulous raiders' lying in 'Orkney and Dublin' speak to and warn us from constructing a sense of home 'in violence and epiphany' ('North' 19). Like our speaker, these unnamed warriors are conveyed to us through transport; the 'longship's swimming tongue' is wise to historical trade and conquests, 'Thor's hammer swung / to geography and trade':

It said, 'Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and gleam
of your furrowed brain.

Compose in darkness.
Expect aurora borealis
in the long foray
but no cascade of light.

Keep your eye clear
as the bleb of the icicle,
trust the feel of what nubbed treasure
your hands have known.' (32-43)

The loop and twist of experience signified here in the brain's 'coil' is raised to the status of an intellectualised position that transcends politics. We hear something speaking to us and it is placed before us for memorialisation and paraphrase: live not by a false expectation of enlightenment, but through a disciplined revisiting of events and a disciplined composure within the recollected darkness. This composure, as Stephen Regan has identified, is fitting for a world beyond our reach, one full of mystery and fear, but one in which we clearly belong (2016: 323).

The god of thunder, Thor, is the strongest and bravest of the Scandinavian deities. Thor is also the god of hallowing, and I contend that verse making for Heaney is a mode of making a place or practice holy. *North* consecrates phrases to bless or to set things apart. This mythos under the sign of Thor, however, is a process that cannot be disconnected from fertility. Norse mythology is largely recorded in Iceland from Scandinavian

materials, and thus, turned by Heaney from power to (fertile) resource for consecration through this extensive translation and transportation of culture. We read on and from a vector of life that carried and continues to carry violence with it, which is repositioned to raises consciousness of darkness within a balanced approach to both the rhetoric of pain and the sectarian narrative of loss. We locate a counterpoint to historical injustice turned to bitterness and anger held so well in the phrase, 'memory incubating the spilled blood' (28). The 'gleam' of collective memory and experience can be applied with the temperament of a 'clear eye'; understand this as a cultural frontier and outlook that comes dripping through the hindsight of seasonal time, *North* suggests to us, as its register resonates with a cool contemplative distance from Thor's hammer, which carries only 'exhaustions nominated peace' and wrong-headed memory 'incubating the spilled blood' (30-31). If not elegiac, it is an excellent model for elegy working towards new grounds for peace.

Listening-Speaking

Heaney's lyricism captures the voices of gods from the arteries of the oral archive to foreground a distinct mode of listening. To use the work of poetry as a metaphor for how our practices keep things alive, sometimes with positive outcomes and sometimes with negative results, Heaney reserves the primary voice (which addresses the reader and the poet together) for his most inspired moments whereby an informed historical negotiation of violence and loss marries with the desire to keep a clear eye on all of this. For me, the poetic consciousness that is mobilized here shoulders some of the responsibility that elegies are shaped to carry. In *North* we see this responsibility widen into an affordance for moral and spiritual rejuvenation when reading across the collection; it resonates with the affects and modes of elegy's capacity to curate a poetics of restoration. It is a new context to approach elegy, with the politics and poetics of consolation cast to one side.

In *North* such profound care for the community at large is a weight carried by an autobiographical mode modulating the domestic to the regional scale, and adjusting the personal to the historical. These affective contours bleed into one voice, tributary by tributary they compose an oceanic mythological register with the most striking authority and graceful momentum:

I shouldered a kind of manhood
stepping in the lift the coffins
of dead relations ('Funeral Rites' 1-3)

I returned to a long strand,
the hammered shod of a bay,
and found only the secular
powers of the Atlantic thundering...

it said Thor's hammer swung
to geography and trade...

It said, 'Lie down
in the word-hoard, burrow
the coil and glean of your furrowed brain

Compose in darkness['];. ('North' 1-4, 22-23, 30-34)

Indirectly and implicitly, *North* laments the loss of life but it is not a volume of lamentation. *North* is quite simply a collection of its time, relevant to the violence in Britain and Ireland in the mid-1970s, at times meditative and reflective, thus more properly

termed elegiac (Kennedy 2) than historical. The multi-layered handling of reflection — via multiple cultural myths sourced across the centuries— constitutes the volume's transparent tapping of a European cultural root system articulate a steady and understated expression of grief. This grief appears within critical, ironic and historical modes expressing pity and shame. This grief straddles shame and compassion at once and is thrown open to the discovery of joy. And this grief is a consequence of and a cause for bereavement that comes from misunderstanding and misapplying history, yet it is placed alongside an enlightened hope that is composed in darkness. This grief is relevant to sectarian division but it steps outside of political and cultural differences with the will to listen to mourning in the moment of and before the moment of loss. Such cross-temporal listening enables us to take responsibility for one's place within a sadness that must move towards forgiving trespasses.

Put another way: remembrance is often charged with love, and while the collection is radically disappointed with the present political and cultural state in which suffering and distress loom large, it feels these affects both fully and on the way to other less paralyzing circuits of being. Reading *North* is not a secular, psychological process that replaces de-ritualized mourning in our age; it invokes fear, denial and guilt without stating any expectation of an end to mourning. That specific comportment is courageous; it is embodied in a consistent yet nuanced lyrical stance that does not deny a robust and reflexive inquiry into regained self-possession. While engage with a wide range of culturally inflected burial and mourning beliefs and practices (medieval Scandinavian rites, twentieth-century [Protestant] Orangemen protests, and the wake of the killings of Norse invaders), rather than step into the fray of either de-ritualizing practices or inciting ritual, the poems taken as a whole make their own ceremony from personal observations and political insight without pressurising the lyrical moment into atonement. Let me just say it isn't elegy as understood by literary studies under the influence of psychoanalysis that must account for consolation, cure and closure.

If elegy can be defined as 'offering serious reflections on a solemn subject' (Kennedy 147), then Heaney's collection is an elegy itself, even if each poem keeps its distance from elegy. The subject is 'violence and epiphany' in world and in the cultural record; it is an important theme for the poet for it destabilizes the political frame for identity politics by adding historical colour to our understanding of settled peoples on the isles. Furthermore, this colouring of historical space through ritual and griefwork writes towards a world within yet not defined by chaotic flux. This standpoint, driven by voice and outlook, is indebted to the poet's acute learning from a pantheon of European mythology and from distinct cultural landmarks soaked in blood that resonate in the contemporaneous geographical present. The collection is thought provoking because it reflects back on whether sombre or stern modes carry an equivalent gravity to satirical and scornful modes; a difficult measure seems to be taking place within the poetry's own reckoning of its own *listening to* and *keeping with* agony and pain. The melody we discern here is the daughter of melancholy.

North teaches us a little about the relationship between elegy and what it is to listen and what it is to sing, and how the relationship between these can either come at a cost or come with a newfound freedom. In allusion to the grieving process whereby once must accept what has changed or is lost, I stress something from personal experience at this point: stepping outside of grief or to withdraw from melancholy is not a question of only accepting what has happened: it is a question of *admitting*. To admit, to allow in, to take on board, is to wear the heaviness and darkness within you so that it becomes a part of you. *North* implicitly makes the case that whether you chose to draw your breath in pain or continue to live in the light is one's own choice that can be made in light of how long one wants to mourn, or how one's culture is indebted to specific practices of mourning.

This 'ingressive summons' (Armstrong 5), is understood most generously by Heaney's speakers in *North* who do not condemn us for having lost a sacred idiom; they raise it in a plea to the heavens, which is refrained from underlining our alienation from mythos. In turn they are liberated from the legislature of loss.

Gods and Elegy

Elegy is a tool for Heaney to revisit a very Irish project: 'to define and interpret the present by bringing it into significant relationship with the past' (1980: 60). This practice must be renewed in our time of extinction. In *North* this project is not limited by historical reference looking behind our life to something we have passed; it triggers an eye and body connecting a practice and a person to something that persists. One might be forgiven for thinking that the poems lead us to infer a pantheistic darkness animating us into new consciousness. This fluid, protean darkness 'holds', we are told; it is, paradoxically, fluid and stable:

This centre holds
and spreads
sump and seedbed.
a bag of waters

and a melting grave. ('Kinship' 4: 1-5)

For Coupe, following Michel Serres, respecting the 'orderly disorder' of the world is to 'discover the organic order that underlies apparently random events and entities'; reverence for plurality and process is important, so too to note that this order is so complex 'that it cannot be understood through the unaided reason' (Coupe 2009: 10). Heaney's centre seems to resonate with Coupe's reading of the value of myth for environmental consciousness that betrays a necessary dialogue between poetry and myth. The Jungian idea, is not a paradox; it is an instable richly layered centre, which is opening inwards, both lasting *and* changing. We might find this signified by the conceptual tension between conservative ideas of death and regeneration, and in Heaney's hands in this collection, it is found under the sign of some forms of memory too.⁴

I wish to turn to David Kennedy's understanding of diffuse and revived elegy here. Keeping with the psychological cue from Jahan Ramazani's quest to find the limits of elegy as an intervention in the tradition of literary scholarship attentive to the poetics and politics of consolation (1995), Kennedy reminds us that 'Western literature is founded on ideas of desire falling short of its object in order for writing to be produced' (129).⁵ Apollo cannot possess Daphne, and thus we have elegy. Kennedy expands from here to make an instructive generalisation that has a degree of application to our reading of *North* (although it is not strictly 'English'):

The type of English poem we are talking about simultaneously asserts consistency and integrity and recognizes that it cannot unconditionally possess the place, event, person or perception it is using to assert them. The only unconditional possession possible is, paradoxically, loss. (129)

Heaney's controlled use of 'gleam' and 'now' throughout *North* purports to consistency as much as these words are of the 'melting grave'; it is (dis)possession through language that turns disappearances into images for our memory, much like we picture the tinsmith's scoop even though it is 'sunk beyond its gleam'. If there are things we cannot see but feel deeply, then we must listen and dream. We must learn, I learn from

reading Heaney, to use our imagination to take us out, through accepting the continuance, of darkness.

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Readers of 'Antaeus' listen to the god speaking. He tells us that he 'arranges' his falls, they enable connection to the grave, which is also the word-*hoard*: '[I] rub myself with sand', which is 'operative' as an 'elixir' that warns: 'let him not plan... my elevation, my fall'. Antaeus is a failure compared with Hercules, but he is the gateway to a new life. He must be wrestled, not killed; offered up to renewal again and again:

I cannot be weaned
Off the earth's long contour, her river-veins.
Down here in my cave

Girdered with root and rock
I am cradled in the dark that wombed me
And nurtured in every artery
Like a small hillock

The hillock links to the burial mounds (barrows) that the speaker must climb to a 'slow triumph' in 'Funeral Rites' (above). Following poems of found bones in an ancient bog, the traces of a murdered and beheaded girl, and general evidence of 'an archaic barbarous rite' (that might have taken place in an 'archetypal pattern' of loss and renewal; Heaney 1980: 57)—the voice in 'Hercules and Antaeus' takes on the authoritative register once more. Now, this authority is of the named god, and it is the vowel of the earth that we hear through the personified form.

I grew out of all this
like a weeping willow
inclined to

the appetites of gravity...

And you, Tacitus,
observe how I make my grove
on an old crannog
piled by the fearful dead:

a desolate peace ('Kinship' 4: 21-24; 5: 1-5)

It is in this desolate peace of mythmaking that the speaker arrives again at the 'goddess' orienting us towards the Earth system:

Read the inhumed faces

Of casualty and victim;
Report us fairly,
How we slaughter
For the common good

And shave the heads
Of the notorious,
how the goddess swallows
our love and terror. (5: 16-24)

The goddess is Gaia, conventionally known through our scientific lexicon as the Earth System. For James Lovelock she is 'the stern and unforgiving bringer of death'

(1989: 208); for Coupe, 'she encompasses both life and death, both maternal affection and violent revenge, both reward and punishment' (2009: 11).

With the lyrical voice now infused with authority we are convinced that Hercules has the measure of the moment of conciliation and regeneration, 'the black powers / feeding off the territory' ('Hercules and Antaeus' 6-7). He lifts up Antaeus, humorously viewed as the 'mould hugger' (8) for he is both stuck in a position defined by a death in the past, and he is a signifier for rebirth that comes from being taken 'out of his element' (15). Raised off the ground and offering a shard of light under his feet, the poem conceives of this specific loss of one's grounding in generic and multicultural elegiac terms:

out of his element
into a dream of loss

and origins—the cradling dark,
the river-veins, the secret gullies
of his strength,
the hatching grounds

of cave and souterrain,
he has bequeathed it all
to elegists. Balor will die
and Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull. (15-24)

Balor, Byrthnoth and Sitting Bull: all these will die in this 'deam of loss'. Tyrant king of the supernatural Fomorians (Balor); the legendary hero of the Battle of Maldon who lead Anglo Saxons —an Essex army— against Vikings —Danish raiders— (Byrthnoth), and the Hunkpapa Lakota leader of the resistance to U.S. government (Sitting Bull); respectively, these will die in this world we inhabit. That is history. And yet these figures and their stories persist in our imaginations as models of absolute loyalty to one's land. The feeling that comes from this loyalty is a source that elegy burrows through while translating eulogy's affects for its purposes. Across the cultural divides of Iceland, Scandanvia, Britain and Ireland, and North America, to 'loss... and origins', these gods return to the hiding places and sources of power ('cave and souterrain). Either exhausted or exhausted by us, in need of regeneration they die. Do they die for us? Regardless, death is the first step; their loss is this first lesson. Loss, conceived within this process, does offer some opportunity for consolation; however, the overriding sense that we draw from the disappearance of something in cultural space is animated by Heaney's elegiac temporality emerging out of the song of the changing states of godliness. This emergence, within death, is signalled most strikingly in the lines that are 'bequeathed' to us, signalled most subtly and beautifully in the volume's prefatory section, which I shall turn to on the way towards a provisional conclusion.

Exemplary Elegiac Temporality ('Two Poems Written In Dedication')

I wish to look at these poems in reverse order, for I have already drawn from moments that appear much later in the collection and we are on this trajectory.

The second of two poems written in dedication to the poet's Aunt, Mary Heaney, 'The Seed Cutters', speaks again to the 'gleam' of its antecedents and successors to invite the reader to fathom whether this keyword persists as the elegiac keynote to *North*.

This poem stabilises the affective overture of this signal word in the first of five sonnets in the collection ('Strange Fruit', 'Act of Union (2)', 'Summer') ending the prelude with a declarative understanding of genres and their inherent flexibility. Here, Heaney's mobilisation of history for the study of life, however, is not autobiographical as with the

opening poem 'Sunlight', which I shall come to shortly. In 'The Seed Cutters' a fusion of attentive art history and the pulse of poetic sensitivity reach through represented life and the aesthetic choices of labour paintings by Pieter Breugel the Elder (1525-1569). This reach through, though not beyond, an inherited image of Western culture understood as exemplifying 'genre painting', rather than being a part of the labour of peasant scenes, paradoxically brings into intimate and localised relations the rural protagonists that 'seem a hundred years away' (1). It cannot be put more simply than that. This paradox provides inspiration for the poet to ejaculate an anti-anthropocentric apostrophe, which, although inspired by composed labour (both that of his Aunt and of Breugel's seed cutters as understood through him and through Heaney), is an odd complement to the physical, labour-based 'manual gearing', which Jennifer Hamilton (following Jacques Derrida) proposes is most urgently required in the Environmental Humanities (2015).

Behind the 'half-circle' of kneeling workers 'a windbreak wind is breaking through' (4). If they are at all pantheistic, the lines do not overreach from a canonical realist oil painting of peasant culture to understanding the pace, courtesy and comportment of the labourers as a way of being in the world; they simply reflect, or echo, the 'broom' or bronzing of the rural scene *under sun*. It is all animated by the Earth. The lines have a discipline as do the labourers who, with 'time to kill', are seen 'taking their time' (8-9); their shape mirrors the action they lazily perform, 'halving each root that falls apart' (9). The long vowels slow down the reading so that the image can come to the surface of our minds, slowly. This reading experience aligns with a larger detachment and grace that dissolves ego and deletes singularity, as with the workers. In terms of representation, this detachment *involves* the labourers peaceably in the seasonal and diurnal temporality. As hard and monotonous as the labour is, it allows us to calmly observe that which falls into their palms: 'a milky gleam, / And, at the centre, a dark watermark' (10-11). A sinister fingerprint of life inhabits the centre of our sustenance and might ruin it for us as it grows. It is a useful metaphor for our times. Before we arrive at this rich image, we must follow the excited speaker delaying the delivery of the final evidence, amassing generative energy for its disclosure, too:

O calendar customs! Under the broom
 Yellowing over them, compose the frieze
 With all of us there, our anonymities. (12-14)

The control of the poem's eye, slowly moving in to look over a labourer's shoulder at the dark core they observe, marries the movement of the voice that also develops into detail. There is something wild in the mirroring and the reflection on the process of mirroring life. Here, the persisting 'dark' triggers high affect in the address to tradition, which might be better understood anthropologically or archeologically, as ethnicity subject to the grammar of the labourers' calendar. John Clare would be a good reference point. Here, in Heaney's world, finally, person, place and practice slip away into a silence that has no name, and where it can be reclaimed or respectfully left to the past; this crossroads left hanging in the mind like Coleridgean imagery, is where we meet as equals without the burden of history and in anonymity. We see this again twenty years later in Heaney's wonderful poem, 'St Kevin and the Blackbird' (*The Spirit Level*, 1995). This gentle call to peace we might not forget has come to us through access to 'the seed potatoes' (5). If the reader discerns any metaphysical hue animating the apostrophe, it is one indebted to realist history of these lands and their huge losses that throb in this space. It is a space of lyrical understatement that soaks the space of dissemination between speaker and reading, between myth and history. This space casts 'the Troubles' into a continuum where the trouble is literally in our hands, for our observation and understanding.⁶ If we sing to this we keep the myth alive.

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The opening poem to the collection, 'Sunlight', is the first from 'Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication for Mary Heaney', which begins the prelude to *North's* mythological-politico inquiry into how one feels settled in a place. For Regan, the dedicatory poems 'provide a bright and sustaining image of beneficence in which the love and security associated with home act as a stay against the darkness that follows' (2016: 324). Regan understands all that lies within 'stately': waiting, continuing, stopping, and residing. Such settlement is multivalent, backlit by acts and dispositions (and their stories); in *North* they take on the hue of punishment, union and fear after they have joyously celebrated a curious version of still life.

In one sense, 'Sunlight' only becomes an elegy when Heaney's Aunt has died; to be 'in' dedication 'for' someone is to put forward devotion and commitment in the spirit of perseverance that can rest within preservation, which is the rule of law in dedicated elegies. In another sense, 'Sunlight' can be considered an elegy only when the ritual practices of rural farming, home economics and domestic husbandry are viewed from a temporal distance. This is not universal; however, from my observations, when these practices and our celebration of them (sometimes through continued practice) have slipped from our social economy (when they are lost in terms of our sensitivity to them), some interesting writing begins in culture. This writing seeks out the responsibility that elegy admits with grace in its propensity to record loss at scale while keeping from sentimentalism's narrow authority. Again, John Clare is a good signpost here.

And yet Heaney draws from elegy's palette for the collection's opening poem that celebrates life as lived in the moment. Its tone and tense is only an inch away from the elegiac, and in that distance it speaks towards elegy as an outsider with great significance that historians of the elegy might learn from. In its first line we are taken into memory; we attune not to loss, but to a lack: 'There was sunlit absence'. This is a specific lack; it is neither deficiency nor a need, but an emptiness or peacefulness. It offers something incredibly valuable for the passing of life on a huge scale, and it sidesteps the politics of desire, marked most calmly by the assurance in the voice. This 'absence', I contend, cannot be darkness; it is sunlit and of the necessity to celebrate things that will pass if we do not hold on to them in some manner or mode. We can read such 'holding' in a variety of ways: from incubating pain and the denial of loss, to respectful commemoration marking a time to reflect on change. Some griefwork keeps us alert to the evitable and the contingent. Within this but not defined by this, the poems of dedication admire a painterly depiction of a lack of self-reflexion.

In the opening poem to *North*, four sense units are cradled by seven quatrains brought into life by a storyteller's orchestration of an animate visual field that captures a baker in action. Realist coordinates come from the objects in the scene; a 'helmeted pump', a 'slung bucket', a 'bakeboard' and the gentle pun of a 'floury apron' (2, 5, 11, 15) place us outside the farmstead in a 'long afternoon' with life moving through the scene: the iron of the pump is 'heated', water from the 'slung' bucket 'honeyed', and the sun 'stood.. cooling' (9, 3, 7). This acute emphasis shows objects interacting with humans; the stove is 'reddening' and pushing a 'plaque of heat' against the portrait's subject whose hands are 'scuffled' from her work at Mossbawn Farm where the poet was born and spent his childhood (8, 13, 20). The past is alive here and it enters the present in the second movement that is spoken from the child present in the mature poet: 'Now she dusts the board / with a goose's wing, / now sits' (17-19). As with other instances of this anchor *in the time of the reading that echoes the moment of writing* this immediacy (or elegiac temporality brought into being) reaches through history and folds the memory into the

present moment. You may disagree, but I feel that it underscores the very moment of the collapsing divide between first-person witness and the reader. It is inclusive without borrowing from your biography. Brought into the scene in this manner, we feel in proximity with the divine as something immanent in nature and therefore beyond our individuated moment that is an extension of personal history.

Contemplating poetry as 'divination' in this period, Heaney has understood 'poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself' (1980: 41). Connected to a diffuse sacrality in 'Sunlight', we observe things in more detail: the bodily form occupies the foreground as the baker is 'broad-lapped, / with whitened nails / and measling shins' (19-21). This concrete reality of the past tense slips into what sounds like the present participle but is carried to us from the poet's past. Ultimately the delay of the poem as written artefact entering into the scene of composition suggests that the poet is speaking of identity burnt onto the carcass of geography; in short, we receive light from the forge of elegiac temporality. It is difficult to define as most affective phenomena of poetry are, but take a look at the spatial register in the final seven lines:

here is a space
again, the scone rising
to the tick of two clocks

And here is love
like a tinsmith's scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.

Here. It's all in that word. It would be patronising to speak of rural life as genuine, lived in relationship to one's surroundings and inflected by the tasks at hand. Our twenty-first century perspective from an urbanised distance does not have to miss the rural nuance. There is no need to say that it does, too often. There is deep trust built into that enjambment of 'space / again', an absence that allows two fields – the abstract and the commonplace – to come together; to bring our worlds into contact with this world of the poem. This trust comes from the poet who is able to see 'both the infinity and immediacy of time in the landscape, and in objects from the past' (Paton 2015: 79). I feel that this is an important part of the poem's delight, for it rests on an intuition; we sense repetition as an extension of, but not conflated with, the marker of the necessity to provide (the kitchen as metonym for familial sustenance). Ritual comes to mind, but so too the need to respect timelessness without historicising it. With the scones baking away, the speaker is not confined by genre; he is at ease to allow the autobiographical lyric to reflect back on what we might observe (following Lenin) as 'the reality of appearances' (Eagleton, 2017: 35). These appearances, in their composition in the final stanza, are inspired by the figure the poem observes. It is a sweet and devoted commitment made as the poet dedicates these lines to a single day of experience as the poem as written artefact records its emergence within the larger memory.

If there was more space, I would like to explore whether this is a common example of Heaney or other contemporary poets working towards an idea of poetry 'as a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit for it' (1980: 52). In the dedication poems, this exit/ entry enfolds enactive speaking into historic action: the 'here' of the final quatrain is the poem as it is right now, delivered before us. It is how it will be remembered once it has passed from speaker to listener. In this vein, 'Love', clarified by simile, equalizes the practices of both baker and poet to the materials that bring their worlds into existence. You are holding a poem; she is baking bread. I feel that Heaney is exploring a principle of dynamism across a manifestation (text) of creation (practice/

labour) as he examines the lifeblood and principle organ of generative reflection in this collection that is imbued with loss.

This very love in 'Sunlight' is going to be like the tinsmith's tool, which has been left in time past as with the discarded 'slung bucket', but perhaps more delicately placed before us. Is it curious that the object from pre-industrial times remains in place in the farmyard, which further enhances the sense of chronological contagion? The scoop, hovering between verb and noun, has had its use modified by time and by environment; however, its 'gleam' has not fully passed into history for it rings out in the vowel sounds of the final image of the meal-bin. And this ring of sound works its way through the collection, betokening a porosity that might look like intratextuality. I have tried to enlarge upon the way the opening poem transforms into this 'scoop' in the final quatrain, reminding us that poems honouring the world they imagine for others can do so by diminishing their own presence. Elegy, alert to this principle, sinks away from the scene; in becoming secondary to the affective circuit of dedication. *North* demonstrates how the elegiac mode translates love to loyalty that honours absence.

Mythology and Melancholy: On The Way To Elegy

Mythology has evolved to help humans cope with their predicament and to help them locate their place in the world. Melancholy momentarily transports humans out of their pre-history to dwell in loss to feel out the contours of dejection on the way to a renewed happiness. This renewal in *North* does not rely on a sense of immortality, nor precedence nor ritualized authority; nor does it rely on a sense of immanence. Dejection and happiness are applied subjects in *North* taking us out of a chronological view of existence and placing mourning in a new light, as Heaney expounds:

I do not mean liberal lamentation that citizens should feel compelled to murder one another or deploy their different military arms over the matter of nomenclatures such as British or Irish. I do not mean public celebrations or execrations of resistance or atrocity... I mean that *I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the process and experience of poetry... it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a human reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity* (1980: 56-57; my italics).

For Karen Armstrong, early civilisation (4000 to 800 BCE), 'was a time of excitement, liberation and pride' but such 'major change on this scale also inspire[d] great fear' (58). *North* alludes to modes of annihilation, from that of individuals to communities. We infer the potential for the destruction of what has gone before us when we cast reconstruction into a poetics and politics of action. Poem after poem, this field of force is cast as a critical counterpoint to fear.

North deals with an incredible range of European myths while digging into the palimpsest of historical violence that runs deep through Irish soil. And yet, the overwhelming sense that I come back to is this: how poetry's handling of myth can awaken us into rapture where profane activities are made sacred in the telling while they are surrounded by darkness.

I knowingly over-read the prefatory poems for their figures become archetypal beings that inhabit my dreaming. They speak to my unconscious, which is not 'mine'; they inspire me to create my own rituals, but not to individuate my experience as 'mine'. I must go back to their imagery, which is shared by many others; it insists, I feel, that we remain open to the spiritual dimension of the speaker's life. Here, on the way to violence and on the other side of violence, the divine is not a distant reality; it is recalled and speaks

to us in an open invitation to integrate ourselves in the stories of destruction and degeneration placed before us. We can rest here. We can always choose to rest at any invitation to enter into the next phase of (re)generation and destruction.

Rather than be *of* the action and yet remain 'in history', elegy absorbs some of the reader's and writer's engagement with loss; their idiosyncratic response to specific losses disclose the affective temporality of the subject reflected in elegies' speakers. *North's* unique prefatory spirituality composes a scene of timelessness and absolute being in which we might participate before we travel to the secular and sectarian violence that follows, or before we travel with desire for consolation or conciliation. Any of these paths, taken in isolation, might ordinarily thoroughly convince us with Axial Age clarity of the vulnerability of the human state. Interesting elegies, ripe for analysis in this period of great devastation, resist electing a single future by looking closely at the crossroads for some time and then they fade away.

In the early 1970s, Seamus Heaney was aware that a cultural shift or reboot was required. His archival digging into cultural memory metaphorically mirrors the descent into darkness that must come prior to the heroic moment of victory. This type of digging is also a historical (autoethnographic) enactment of the descent into the chaos of the present. New life does not arrive without some form of death; but death requires its consciousness, and we can bring this to death or we can make darkness conscious of itself. In this paradoxically conceived dark light, the poet embarks upon the next revolution of Irish and Northern Irish history by laying out a series of mythological motifs and allegories. If these concord with the spirit in which they are bequeathed — as I have attempted to outline in this paper focused on the elegiac dimension to these poems — these myths become true for this is how they are effective. Their validity compels us to live fully in admiration of the poet's priestly role and his insight into the lost world that persists. I discover and follow nothing more than an affective contour in *North* that takes on the hue and register of nothing less than a magical dimension. Ultimately, in the case study *North*, multiple myths remind us that politics overlook love, that dispossession alerts us to struggles that we must overcome and not incubate, and more than ever we must act with intergenerational courtesy as we move to interspecies healing. Elegy in this critical clearing is not merely a generic category; it is released into a visionary possibility of diplomacy and peace. I consider this release of elegy from the bounds of consolation as a literary force capable of a powerful expression of global responsibility that rests on the precipice of action, referring to questions of agency and power (and how these affect groups). I argue that the elegiac mode in Heaney's *North* sits precisely at a short distance from the lyrical space of spiritual scrutiny that orbits a historical temporality; this late scene is ripe for replacing the definitions of our experiences in the light of poetry's capacity to admit loss into its own special reckoning of life. Only now I want to ask the question: might something like this help us?

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Notes

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1. Tom Bristow is Junior Research Fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Durham University, and Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies, University of London. He is keen to hear from PAN readers at thomas.bristow@durham.ac.uk.
 2. For inspiration, please look at the university-based social work of Prof. Karine Waters and Dr Tessa Evans-Campbell at University of Washington, and the work of Dr Lioni Pihama at Te Kotahi Research Institute at the University of Waikato.
 3. See the urgent, bottom-up and globalized UK 'Extinction Rebellion' network, at <https://rebellion.earth/>
 4. In a manner respectful to W.B. Yeats and James Joyce, Seamus Heaney addressed the Royal Irish Academy and guests on 20 March 2013 at the National Museum (on 100 objects of Ireland) from Mesolithic Age to Third Millennium, as follows: "in conclusion I would say that the experience [of reading the exhibition book and seeing the objects] encourages us to believe that there is a centre which can – and does – hold" (Heaney 2013).
 5. Ramazani's study is a critical extension of Peter Sacks' publication of 1985. The study of elegy in recent years has been dominated by a psychoanalytical approach to individuated feelings and subjectivity (to claim the psychic basis to elegy), and thus fails to speak to the broader tapestry of life that this article wishes to explore.
 6. The Great Famine of 1845-49 is defined by 1 million deaths and the emigration of 1 million people. The politics of cultural loss is highlighted by the legacy of Land War (1870s to 1890s), one of the largest agrarian movements of nineteenth-century Europe. Ireland marks National Famine Commemoration Day on a Sunday in May.